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Driscoll, Matthew James

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The Long and Winding Road

Manuscript Culture in Late Pre-Modern Iceland

The extent and quality of manuscript production in Iceland during the middle ages – remarkable in view both of the small size and relative isolation of the country – is well known.¹ Less well known is the fact that manuscript culture continued to thrive in Iceland, long after the coming of print in the 16th century.² With paper quickly replacing the more expensive vellum and a steady increase in literacy among ordinary people throughout the period, manuscript transmission remained the norm, for many types of literature at least, throughout the pre-modern era.³ The present article examines this phenomenon, with particular focus on Magnús Jónsson í Tjaldanesi,⁴ an ordinary farmer with no formal education who was still copying manuscripts in the first decades of the 20th century, as James Joyce sat in Trieste and Zürich writing *Ulysses*.

The Medieval Background

The culture of the book first came to Iceland in the wake of Christianity, the earliest settlers, who came predominantly from Norway in the 9th and 10th centuries, having by and large been pagan and illiterate. It may be assumed that books in Latin were brought to Iceland in connexion with the conversion, in the year 999/1000, and then subsequently produced in Iceland for domestic use. It is unclear exactly when writing in the vernacular began, but Icelanders must certainly have been writing in their mother tongue by the year 1100 (Turville-Petre 1953, 74–80; Hreinn Benediktsson 1965, 13–18). The earliest extant vernacular manuscripts, few in number and nearly all fragmentary, date from the second half of the 12th century, however, and contain mostly translations of religious (homiletic and hagiographic) and learned (computational and historical-geographical) material. Although this can be no more than a small part of what was produced in Iceland at the time, we cannot know how representative a part it is, but it would not be entirely surprising if the first products of book culture in Iceland were texts of clerical provenance intended for the furtherance of the new religion.

Although it is the 13th century, during which the history of the kings of Norway known as *Heimskringla*, attributed to the chieftain Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241), and the major *Íslendingasögur*, or “Sagas of Icelanders”, are

thought to have been composed, which is regarded as the “golden age” of Icelandic literary production, relatively few manuscripts survive from this period. It is the following century, however, the 14th, which appears to have been the “golden age” of Icelandic manuscript production. Altogether about 300 manuscripts, nearly half of those that survive from the medieval period, are dated to the 14th century, including many of the largest and most impressive Icelandic medieval codices, such as *Flateyjarbók* (GkS 1005 fol.), written about 1387-94 (Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2005, 249).

This “golden age” came to an abrupt end in the beginning of the 15th century with the arrival of the Black Death (1402–03), which decimated the population and had severe consequences for book production in Iceland. The professionalism so evident in 14th-century manuscripts disappears, and there begins a long period of stagnation in palaeography and orthography. Literary works continued to be produced, however, now including translations of sermons, saints’ lives and exempla from Danish, German and English sources, some presumably printed. In the 15th and early 16th centuries we also see an increasing number of manuscripts containing what were later to become Iceland’s most popular prose genres, the romances or *riddarasögur*, both translated and indigenous,⁵ and the mythical-heroic *fornaldarsögur*,⁶ as well as metrical romances or *rímur*,⁷ a genre which, alongside the prose romances, would come to dominate manuscript production in Iceland.

There are somewhere between 700 and 800 medieval Icelandic vernacular manuscripts extant, most of them defective or fragmentary (Stefán Karlsson 2002, 833; Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2005, 249). How large, or small, a percentage this represents of those produced is impossible to say, but it is unlikely to be greater than 15–20%, and perhaps as little as 6–7%.⁸

We know the names of only a handful of scribes from the medieval period, so it is difficult to say to what extent laymen were involved in manuscript culture in Iceland. For the earliest period, till about 1250, it is probably safe to assume that all scribes were clerics. But the larger monasteries appear early on to have produced books not only for their own use but also for members of the laity – as well as for export to Norway (Stefán Karlsson 1979). It seems also clear that prominent laymen themselves kept scribes in their employ. On the literacy of the laity in the middle ages there is little direct evidence, but there is a good deal of evidence from the 16th century onwards, all pointing to a very high degree of literacy among not just the richer classes of society but also, and increasingly, among ordinary people (Loftur Guttormsson 1989). To what extent this can be taken to represent the situation in the middle ages has been the subject of some debate, but there can be no question that the lay elite played an active role in the production and transmission of secular literature from the 13th century onwards, and that in the course of the middle ages direct involvement in literary production and dissemination spread to other layers of society (Stefán Karlsson 1970; Stefán Karlsson 2006).

Manuscript Culture in Post-Reformation Iceland

Several things happened in the course of the 16th century which were to change the nature of manuscript culture in Iceland. Firstly, and most obviously, there was the Reformation, complete in Iceland in 1550, which had a profound effect, as elsewhere in Northern Europe, on the intellectual life in the country. One direct result of the Reformation was that manuscripts of an overtly Catholic nature were destroyed or “recycled”, i.e. cut up for use in book bindings or scraped clean and written on again, although just how many is hard to say. In general the production of manuscripts appears to have fallen off in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation, even in the case of the native saga literature; there are only a very few saga manuscripts which can be reliably dated to the first half of the century, and virtually none to the second half. The production of manuscripts did not stop altogether, however, and we have some impressive codices of the lawbook *Jónsbók* – despite the fact that it appeared in print in 1578 – as well as collections of religious and moralising poetry and *rímur*.

Concurrent with the Reformation, paper made its appearance, gradually replacing the more expensive and difficult to produce vellum; the oldest Icelandic paper manuscript now extant, AM 232 8vo, is in fact the *cartularium* (1540–48) of Gissur Einarsson, the first Protestant bishop of Iceland (at Skálholt). Vellum still tended to be preferred for certain types of manuscripts, legal codices for example, until well into the 17th century, but the number of paper manuscripts increased rapidly.

There was another major event in the 16th century: the arrival of print. The first printing press was set up at the bishop’s see in Hólar sometime in the early 1530s. The effect this had on manuscript production in Iceland was limited, however, for the simple reason that for the two and a half centuries following its introduction, that is until the founding of the press at Hráppsey in 1773, printing in Iceland remained entirely in the hands of the Church, which, for the most part, did not consider secular literature, including the older saga literature, to be suitable for publication (Klemens Jónsson 1930, Steingrímur Jónsson 1989). Even once the church’s monopoly had been broken, few secular literary works were printed, the chief concern of those who published books in Iceland being the dissemination of practical knowledge for the betterment of their countrymen. Most were therefore openly hostile to popular literary genres such as sagas and *rímur*, which they viewed as inimical to progress (Loftur Guttormsson 1987). While on the continent, in Britain and in much of the rest of Scandinavia, precisely this sort of thing had formed the basis for a booming book trade from the 16th century onwards, in Iceland this material continued to circulate almost entirely in manuscript.

Although the Reformation had no immediate effect on the spread of literacy in Iceland, it is clear that there came a general increase in popular literacy with the pietistic reforms of the 18th century, which saw to it that at least one person in every household could read. With the spread of literacy to all levels of society came an attendant increase in the number of people at the lower end of the social scale who were actively involved in the production

and dissemination of manuscripts. And here we are in a better position to identify these people: from about the middle of the 17th century it became customary for scribes to identify themselves in colophons, often giving also the date and place of writing. Title-pages also began to appear, in imitation of printed books, which frequently provide information on the identity of the scribe and circumstances under which the manuscripts came into being or the use for which they were intended.

There was, as has been said, a general lull in the production of manuscripts in the 16th century, particularly those of a historical or pseudo-historical nature, i.e. sagas. In the 17th century there begins what is commonly identified as a revival in interest in the earlier saga literature, which came in the wake of humanist interest in the sagas as historical sources (Springborg 1977, Jakob Benediksson 1981, Haraldur Bernharðsson 1999). This revival was centred on the activities of the two bishops, Þorlákur Skúlason (1597–1656, bishop from 1628) at Hólar, in the north of Iceland, and Brynjólfur Sveinsson (1605–74, bishop from 1639) at Skálholt, in the south, who enlisted the services of a large number of copyists, both learned and lay, who were set to copying the more important works of the middle ages, in particular those felt to be of historical interest. Most prominent among the people who copied manuscripts for Bishop Þorlákur was Björn Jónsson á Skarðsá (1574–1655), who, although he had received no formal education, must be counted as among the most learned men of his age. And in fact, the majority of 17th-century copyists, those whose names are known, were not members of the clergy although many had spent time at the schools in Hólar or Skálholt or were the sons of clergymen.

One such was Magnús Jónsson (1637–1702), nicknamed *hinn digri* (“the stout”), who lived on the island Vigur in the fjord Ísafjarðardjúp, in north-western Iceland. Magnús was the son of a clergyman and had himself attended the school at Skálholt briefly, although he left without completing his education. He was a wealthy man by Icelandic standards and had a passionate interest in literature, assembling in the course of his lifetime a significant collection of manuscripts of all types, some of which he copied himself but most written for him by others. There are at least 20 manuscripts that were either written by Magnús or at his behest, and about as many again which were produced by the scribes who chiefly copied things for him and in which he may therefore have been involved (Jón Helgason 1955, 7–14; Jóhann Gunnar Ólafsson 1956, 122–24). The level of manuscript production under the auspices of Magnús í Vigur was unequalled anywhere in the country at the time. Many of Magnús’s manuscripts have highly elaborate title-pages with florid titles, such as the following, from a manuscript now in the British Library:

A collection of stories of foreign peoples, extremely enlightening concerning the inhabitants of various other countries, foreign emperors, kings, counts, dukes, earls, knights, lords, gentlemen, dignitaries, heroes, warriors, noteworthy, powerful and highborn men, who populated the various parts of the world in olden times, containing their genealogies and origins, their budding precociousness, wisdom and chivalrous endeavours in horsemanship, scholarly studies, duelling,

fearlessness and other developments in various kingdoms, which they conquered with bloodshed and battle. Carefully put together, revised and improved by the honourable and highborn nobleman Magnús Jónsson in Vigur, for the education and entertainment of those who wish to hear such stories. Written down at his request by Jón Þórðarson. Anno MDCXCVI.⁹

Magnús í Vigur typifies in many ways the kind of book-loving Icelander of whom there were hundreds in the ensuing centuries, men whose circumstances were perhaps less comfortable than Magnús's, but whose love of the written word was no less great. It was these men who came to dominate manuscript production in Iceland, for the most part ordinary people with little or no formal education, often the heads of large households, who spent the long winter months sedulously copying out texts.¹⁰

In many cases, these manuscripts were for private use, copied to be read aloud at the *kvöldvaka*, or "evening wake". In its broadest sense, the term *kvöldvaka* refers to the period of the day, in winter, during which the lamp was lit, i.e. from shortly after sunset until the time when the members of the household retired for the night. It is also commonly used to refer to the reading aloud of sagas and recitation of *rímur* and other poetry during this period, a practice dating apparently from the earliest times and surviving, in some places at least, until the beginning of the 20th century. A good deal has been written on this practice, especially with reference to the middle ages, for the light it may be able to throw on the origins of Icelandic saga-writing (Hermann Pálsson 1962; Mitchell 1991, 92–114; Driscoll 1997, 38–46). An understanding of the institution of the *kvöldvaka* is no less crucial to a study of manuscript production in post-medieval Iceland, however, as it provided the context for which – and in some cases clearly also in which – a large number of manuscripts were produced.¹¹ This link with the *kvöldvaka* is sometimes made explicit in the titles given to the manuscripts. The title-page of Lbs 2787 8vo, for example, reads: "An entertaining book containing a few sagas to pass the time in the evening at home and for the edification of those willing to listen, compiled and written by Finnur Gíslason in 1872".¹²

Some scribes were so prolific, producing far more manuscripts than they themselves could possibly have made use of, that they clearly had other concerns, and there are examples of crofters and labourers supplementing their incomes through copying texts. Some people, though not scribes themselves, had others copy manuscripts for them, and put together large collections, suffering from what Grímur M. Helgason, describing one such, Jón Jónsson í Simbakoti (1834–1912), called "an insatiable longing for books".¹³ Jón í Simbakoti was also able to use this "longing for books" to supplement his income, lending his books and manuscripts out to the local farmers and fishermen for a small fee (Grímur M. Helgason 1988).

One of the more prolific scribes of the 19th century was Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson (1792–1863), who was born at Hamar í Fljótum in Skagafjörður, northern Iceland. His father, Þorsteinn Guðmundsson, had attended the cathedral school at Hólar, graduating in 1783 (he had not been a good student, and was not able to secure a living), but the younger Þorsteinn had no formal education. He spent most of the early part of his life at the

farm Heiði í Sléttuhlíð and then later on the island Málmey, both also in Skagafjörður. Þorsteinn, despite having to farm and fish for a living, devoted himself to collecting and copying manuscripts and assembled a large library in the course of his lifetime, the bulk of which was acquired by the National Library (Landsbókasafn Íslands) in Reykjavík in 1893 (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson 1972, 48-50; Guðmundur Sigurður Jóhannsson et al., ed. 1981-99, VII, 295-97). There are about 60 manuscripts preserved in his hand, altogether about 16000 pages, the earliest of them dating from about 1810 and the latest from 1860. In terms of contents they are about equally divided between *rímur*, altogether some 200 different cycles, and prose sagas, all the major genres of which are represented, the translated and original *riddarasögur*, *konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and various other things, for example a translation of the *Thousand and one nights*. There are also collections of poetry, various accounts of travel in the middle east (*reisubækur*) and texts on Roman and Greek mythology. Even during Þorsteinn's own lifetime it was recognised that his texts frequently contained errors and omissions, it was thought – perhaps over generously – owing to the poor quality of his exemplars (Finnur Sigmundsson ed. 1950-51, I, 149-50; cf. I, 360), and librarian and biographer Páll Eggert Ólason (1948-76, V, 205) comments tersely in *Íslenskar æviskrár* that “everything was very shoddy from his hand”.¹⁴

Another of the more prolific scribes of this period was Jóhannes Jónsson (1798-1877). In the census for 1816 he is listed as a *vinnumaður*, i.e. common labourer, at the farm Stóra-Vatnshorn in Haukadalur, Dalasýsla, western Iceland, but he eventually became *bóndi*, i.e. a farmer who owns his own land, at Smyrlahóll, a medium-sized farm, also in Haukadalur. The number of manuscripts surviving in his hand is relatively small, only seven complete manuscripts plus a few bits and pieces, but we know that Jóhannes copied a large number of texts because he left behind a list of them, entitled “Register of the *rímur*, sagas, various poems, hymns, and prayers, along with other things, that have been copied by Jóhannes Jónsson, farmer at Smyrlahóll in Haukadalur, initially begun about the year 1818, to 1855-56”, now JS 203 8vo.¹⁵

In addition to several hundred hymns and poems, Jóhannes lists 49 sets of *rímur* and 86 sagas. Only three saga manuscripts in his hand have survived. The oldest of these was begun in 1851 but completed in 1857, after the “Regystur” was compiled, and the other two post-date it entirely. These manuscripts contain texts of 70 sagas altogether, 48 of them not listed in the “Regystur”, bringing Jóhannes's total output to 134 individual titles. Of these 70 survive, giving a survival rate of 52%. But this assumes Jóhannes only copied each saga once, which is clearly not the case, since a number of the sagas listed in the “Regystur” are found in manuscripts which post-date it and must therefore have been copied at least twice. It is impossible to know how many times Jóhannes might have copied a given saga. For comparison there is one set of *rímur*, the *Rímur af Reimari og Fal* by Hákon Hákonarson (c. 1793-1863), which Jóhannes says he copied over 20 times, and yet not a single copy survives in his hand. If, on average, he only copied every saga twice, the rate of survival is down to 30%; if he copied each one an average of

ten times, which is perfectly possible, we are down to 6%, which is probably nearer the truth.

Like Magnús í Vigur (or the scribes who worked for him), Jóhannes was also fond of giving florid titles to his manuscripts. The oldest of the manuscripts surviving, still in private ownership, is entitled “A storybook of men of old, relating their ancestry and actions, strength and fortitude, temperament and physique, prowess and wisdom, their manly deeds and much else, now written and collected by Jóhannes Jónsson, farmer, from Smyrlahóll, during the years 1851–57”,¹⁶ while another, Lbs 1767 4to, has the equally colourful title: “Twenty-six sagas of emperors, kings, dukes, earls, barons, farmers, servants and slaves, good and evil; collected and copied by Jóhannes Jónsson”.¹⁷

Magnús í Tjaldanesi

One of the very last, and certainly among the most prolific, scribes in Iceland was Magnús Jónsson (1835–1922), who was born nearly 200 years after his namesake in Vigur, and lived most of his life on the farm Tjaldanes in Dalasýsla, western Iceland (Jón Guðnason 1961–66, II, 375, Páll Eggert Ólason 1948–76, III, 439). An ordinary farmer with no formal education, Magnús devoted his long life to copying texts, the majority of which he collected under the general title “Fornmannasögur Norðurlanda”, that is, “Sagas of the ancient men of the northern lands”. In about a dozen cases, Magnús’s texts are the only copies now extant.¹⁸

There are 43 manuscripts in Magnús’s hand known to the present writer, 34 of them dated, the earliest to 1874, the latest to 1916; the nine remaining are undated but appear to be earlier than the dated volumes. They contain, in total, texts of 171 individual sagas.¹⁹ Of over half of these there are two, three or even four copies, so that the total number of texts, as opposed to sagas, is 315, altogether some 28000 pages, or over 6 million words – impressive by any standards. But certainly there were many more manuscripts which have not been preserved, in all likelihood at least twice as many.²⁰

Magnús’s texts cover the full range of saga types, including essentially all the medieval *fornaldar*- and *riddarasögur*, both translated and indigenous, nearly 50 of the younger Icelandic prose romances sometimes referred to as *lygisögur* (lit. “lying sagas”), 28 of the younger “reconstituted” *fornaldarsögur*, i.e. works which were written after the Reformation, chiefly on the basis of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* (Power 1984), 13 translations of German *Volksbücher*, which generally reached Iceland through Danish intermediaries (Seelow 1989), and 10 of the *Íslendingasögur*. Only one of these is found among the sagas in the volumes bearing the title “Fornmannasögur Norðurlanda”; the other nine are preserved in a volume of about the same size and with the same general layout as the “Fornmannasögur” volumes but entitled “Íslendingasögur. þriðja bindi” (Sagas of Icelanders, volume III). As no other volumes in this collection have survived, it is impossible to know how many there may have been, but one may safely assume another two. If they contained a similar number of texts, the total for the three volumes would

have been around 30; if there had been a fourth, the collection would have comprised essentially all the sagas normally ascribed to this genre.

Four of the sagas classed by Magnús as “Fornmannasögur Norðurlanda” are what would at the time probably have been termed *æfintýri* (adventures, tales). These were literary works of the 17th or 18th century which had found their way, principally via Denmark, to Iceland, and circulated, recast in Icelandic prose, in manuscripts alongside the romances and mythical-heroic sagas. One of the works which comes under this heading is ‘sagan af Skanderbeg’, a biography of Georgius Castriotus (1405–68), the Albanian national hero, known as Iskander-Beg or Scanderbeg. The saga is a translation of a chapter in Ludvig Holberg’s *Heltehistorier* (Copenhagen, 1739), itself based on Barletti’s *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum principis* (Rome, 1506–10). The saga became quite popular in Iceland and is found in about a dozen 19th-century manuscripts as well as a set of *rímur* (Driscoll 2007).

This may seem a rather curious ragbag of material, but in fact Magnús’s scribal production is exceptionally homogeneous by 19th-century standards – just compare Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson and Jóhannes Jónsson. There are no *rímur*, or indeed any poetry of any kind, preserved in Magnús’s hand; nor are there any of the genealogical works (*ættartölur*), biographies (*ævisögur*), annals and so forth with which 18th- and 19th-century Icelandic manuscripts abound. This dedication to a single genre – however amorphous or ill-defined it may appear to our modern sensibilities – is really quite remarkable.

About half the volumes in the “Fornmannasögur” collection contain prefaces. In these, Magnús typically discusses his exemplar, how he had got hold of it, by whom it had been written, when and where, and the nature of the text, frequently in relation to other copies he has seen. Magnús can only have got the idea of prefacing his saga texts with information of this kind from printed books – he even numbers the pages of his prefaces using lower-case Roman numerals – but the prefaces depict a world at a considerable remove from the world of print and provide a wealth of information on the scribal network in late 19th-century Iceland. Indeed, the structure and mechanisms of chirographic transmission depicted by Magnús in his prefaces appear, in their essentials, to be the same as at any time during the previous three or four centuries.

Magnús indicates in several of the prefaces that he began copying sagas at an early age. In the preface to *Huldar saga*, an 18th-century reconstruction of a lost medieval saga about a troll-woman, Magnús explains how he first developed this interest:

Ever since my youth I have had the desire to read sagas and when I was grown up I began collecting sagas, first the sagas of Icelanders and not only them but also all the romances I could get hold of, and later I began making copies of them [...]. When I was a shepherd boy at Staður á Reykjanesi round about the age of confirmation there was a labourer there named Teitur, the brother of Ólafur Teitsson the farmer on Sviðnur in Breiðafjörður; he was a knowledgeable man. He owned a manuscript containing *Huldar saga* along with other sagas. I tried repeatedly to read this manuscript but with little success as it was tattered and worn and the script was bad. I had little idea then of the value of old books.²¹

It does not appear to have taken Magnús very long to develop an appreciation of “the value of old books”, as it is clear from other prefaces that he must have begun copying at about the same time. In his preface to *Hálfdánar saga Brönuþóstra*, one of the *fornaldarsögur*, for instance, he says that that saga was one of several he copied around the age of confirmation. The circumstances under which he did so – at Ögur, one of the *verstöðvar*, or fishing stations, in the Westfjords, where men, principally farm-labourers, came together every year in the early spring to fish²² – are described in several of the prefaces. Another place Magnús fished out of was Vigur – the home of his namesake and predecessor, Magnús *digri*.

A very clear picture emerges from the prefaces of a scribal network, concentrated on the area around Breiðafjörður in the west, but covering the whole of the country, and comprised for the most part of people like Magnús, ordinary, uneducated farmers who appreciated “the value of old books”. Well over a hundred individuals are named in the prefaces as having provided Magnús with manuscripts, the better part of them well-known scribes themselves. One of Magnús’s regular contacts was Guðbrandur Sturlaugsson á Hvítadal (1820–1897) (Jón Guðnason 1961–66, II, 454). Hvítidalur is not far from Tjaldanes, only about eight kilometres, and Guðbrandur, a slightly older contemporary of Magnús’s, shared his enthusiasm for saga manuscripts. There are at least seventeen manuscripts preserved in Guðbrandur’s hand, the majority still in private ownership, including three which have recently come to light in Sweden; all contain similar material to that found in Magnús’s collection. Many of Magnús’s texts came from or by way of Guðbrandur, where Guðbrandur had managed to get hold of manuscripts which they both then copied.

Magnús also makes frequent mention of Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877), a well-known poet and lay scholar who lived for the last twenty-five years of his life on the island Flatey, which lies about 45 km to the west of Tjaldanes (Páll Eggert Ólason 1948–76, II, 66–67). Magnús appears to have known Gísli well, and several of his texts derive from Gísli’s manuscripts. Magnús’s copy of *Trójumanna saga* – a translation of a 17th-century Danish translation of Guido de Columnis’s *Historia Troiana*, rather than the 13th-century compilation of the same name which was based chiefly on Darius Phrygius’s *De Excidio Troiae* – is copied from a manuscript in Gísli Konráðsson’s hand, he says, which had been given to him by Gísli’s son Indriði (1822–1898). Curiously, one person Magnús must have known, given they both knew Gísli Konráðsson, but never mentions, is Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur (1840–1930) – a prolific scribe in his own right and Magnús’s chief rival for the title of “last man standing” (Davíð Ólafsson 2008, 2010; see also Davíð Ólafsson’s contribution to the present volume).

Many of Magnús’s exemplars came from further afield, however, and there are numerous descriptions of the great lengths he was often forced to go to in order to get hold of a manuscript. The following, the preface to *Rígabals saga*, a romance ascribed to the poet and clergyman Jón Oddsson Hjaltalín (1749–1835) (Driscoll 1997, esp. 75–132), will serve as an example:

When I was young I copied this saga at Staður in Reykjanes from an old manuscript that Kristján Einarsson from Grónes got for me and was owned by his foster-father, Ólafur Guðmundsson from Grónes. Later I lost the copy I had made and was unable to get another one anywhere, no matter where I looked; I was told there were copies in this place or that, but whenever I tried to get hold of them they were not there or had been lost, and it was the same with the Grónes manuscript; when I tried to get hold of it again it was nowhere to be found and obviously destroyed long ago. Finally Guðbrandur á Hvítadal was able to get a copy in 1889 from Sigurður Árnason from Kirkjuhvammur, or rather through his agency, from up north in Fljót, he said, and then I borrowed it from Guðbrandur.²³

Magnús sometimes also uses printed books as sources. A good many of his *fornaldarsaga* texts, for example, are said to have been copied from the printed edition, but Magnús generally adds something to the effect that he has previously copied or at least seen the sags in old manuscripts. And this seems to be his criterion: he will, in the absence of a manuscript copy, take the text from a printed edition, but only when he himself knows there to have been a manuscript copy of it. Where his text is based on a manuscript copy he generally also compares it with that of the printed edition. Sometimes he is prepared to admit that the printed text is better, as with *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, which he has copied from a manuscript but then compared with the printed edition: “they are the same for the most part, but where they differ the printed text is probably the more correct”.²⁴ But as often as not he prefers the manuscript copies. Regarding *Saga af Andra jarli og Högna Hjarandasyni*, one of the younger romances, which appeared in a popular printed edition in 1895, he says: “it seems to me that there is a great difference between the wording of this text and the printed one, but a small difference in the plot and yet some, but I find the written text fuller, and the narrative better organised, although the difference is not great”.²⁵ Sometimes he seems content to regard them simply as different versions. His text of *Sagan af Kára Kárasyni*, another of the younger romances, is from Einar Þórðarson’s popular printed edition from 1886, but Magnús says that he has another copy “which I copied from manuscripts, but the wording of that version is very different, although the plot is the same”,²⁶ adding that that version was in no way inferior to the printed one. Regarding *Mírmanns saga*, an indigenous romance thought to have been composed in the 14th century, he says:

There is something strange about this saga; it has been found widely here in the west and I have copied it many times for various people, because its subject matter has been felt to be exceptional and the saga is lovely. But then came the version that was printed a few years ago which is so old-fashioned and unlike the other in wording that they have nothing in common apart from the name, although in both the story was essentially the same. The one I have copied here is taken verbatim from the printed version, but I have also the other one in another manuscript.²⁷

Although Magnús says that he has copied the text of the printed edition “orðrétt” (verbatim), Desmond Slay has shown in his edition of *Mírmanns saga* that a great many changes have in fact been made, although mostly of a relatively minor nature (Slay, ed. 1997, cxv–cxxii). Magnús’s texts of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Eiríks saga víðförla* and *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, all *fornaldarsögur*, are similarly based on the printed editions but with a good many minor changes (Slay 1960, 94–97; Jensen, ed. 1983, clxxx–clxxxi; Zitzelsberger, ed. 1969, 334).

In general, Magnús’s attitude toward the text appears to have been that so long as one didn’t tamper with the plot, which he calls “efni” (substance, material), one could do pretty much whatever one saw fit with the actual words, which he refers to as “orðfæri” (wording), or “búningur” (clothing, attire). Magnús frequently comments in the prefaces that he has felt obliged to tidy up (“laga”) the sagas he copies stylistically. *Sagan af Falentín og Urson*, a translation of a Dutch chapbook, he says, was “exceptionally poor in style, but I have tried to remedy this somewhat”,²⁸ and of *Beyers saga*, one of the translated romances, he writes: “the wording of the saga was not good, and I have tried to put right what I considered most disagreeable, but have nowhere altered the story”.²⁹

This attitude is reminiscent of that of oral cultures, and the Swiss medievalist Paul Zumthor (1972, 68–74) argued that a fundamental fluidity – *mouvance* as he termed it – is also a feature of medieval written texts, which, like oral texts, never achieve a state conceived of as final. That this should still be the position taken in late 19th- and early 20th-century Iceland is, on the face of it, remarkable. But given that so many other aspects of literary transmission had remained essentially unchanged in Iceland for over half a millennium, it is perhaps not so remarkable after all: Magnús was arguably simply doing what copyists had always done.

Magnús was regarded during his lifetime as a highly learned man. The book-seller and publisher Sigfús Eymundsson (1837–1911), who brought out a popular edition of *Skáld-Helga saga* in 1897 based on a text provided by Magnús, notes in an afterword:

All his life he has collected and searched for old manuscripts and copied all that he thought was in the least important and worthy of saving from oblivion. He now has 18 books of copies in 4to, each book of 800 pages, and here there are many rare sagas, which he has managed to get his hands on from various places and then copied. He is surely one of the most knowledgeable men now living in Iceland.³⁰

It is also a measure of the respect afforded him that in 1909 Landsbókasafn Íslands bought a complete set, 20 volumes, of his collection “Fornmannasögur Norðurlanda”, along with the single volume of *Íslendingasögur*, for which he was paid 250 kr. – roughly half of what the library had to spend on acquisitions in any given year. But times were changing, and the value of Magnús’s life’s work has not been appreciated by subsequent generations. His “editorial method”, which, as noted above, consisted of him changing the texts he copied as he saw fit, was at odds with accepted scholarly practice, and

the material he was so keen to save from oblivion – essentially what ordinary men and women read in Iceland in the second half of the 19th century – did not fit in with the new notions, defined and dictated by the national-romantic intellectuals in Reykjavík and Copenhagen, of what constituted “Íslensk menning” (Icelandic culture).

It seems clear that Magnús, toward the end of his life, was well aware that the world he inhabited was fast disappearing. “It is so strange” he says at one point, “that these old books disappear, so that no-one knows what has become of them”.³¹ The social changes that took place in Iceland in the first decades of the 20th century were greater than at any other time in the country’s history, and led, among other things, to the end of the *kvöldvaka*, the practice that had kept manuscript culture alive in Iceland for so long; with the passing of that practice, the manuscripts no longer had any role to play.

NOTES

- 1 On Icelandic manuscripts generally see Halldór Hermannsson 1929, Jón Helgason 1958, Ólafur Halldórsson 1989, Sverrir Tómasson 2002, Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2004 and Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2005. Major manuscript collections are found in Reykjavík (Landsbókasafn Íslands and Stofnun Árna Magnússonar), Copenhagen (Den Arnamagnæanske Samling and Det kongelige Bibliotek) and Stockholm (Kungliga Biblioteket), for which the published catalogues are, respectively, Páll Eggert Ólason et al. 1918-1996, Kålund 1888-1894, Kålund 1900 and Gödel 1897-1900. Smaller but none the less significant collections of Icelandic manuscripts are also found in London (British Library), Oxford (Bodleian Library) and Uppsala (Universitetsbibliotek).
- 2 It has, over the last 20 years or so, gradually come to be recognised that the invention of the printing press did not lead to the immediate disappearance of handwritten communication, as has sometimes been claimed (see e.g. Chartier 2007); but manuscript culture arguably lasted longer, and played a greater role, in Iceland than anywhere else in Europe (see also Davíð Ólafsson’s article in the present volume).
- 3 By “late pre-modern Iceland” I mean Iceland in the period from the Enlightenment (the effects of which began to be felt in the 1770s) to the First World War, roughly what is referred to in other contexts as “the long 19th century”.
- 4 Traditionally, and still today, most Icelanders do not have surnames, but rather a patronym, ending in “-son” for men and “-dóttir” for women; as this is not really a name, but rather a description, Icelanders are normally referred to by their first names (and are indexed accordingly). It was also common, although it never had any official status, to refer to people by the place they lived, using the appropriate preposition and the name of the place in the dative: Magnús í Tjaldanesi.
- 5 The term *riddarasaga* (lit. “saga of knights”), is used both for the translations of French courtly literature which were produced in Norway in the course of the 13th century as well as for the original Icelandic works similar to them in theme and structure but not based directly on any continental models; on the former see Glauser 2005 and the latter Driscoll 2005.
- 6 For a definition of the genre see Torfi Tulinius 2005; for aspects of the history of the transmission of the *fornaldarsögur* see Driscoll 2003.
- 7 *Rímur* were arguably the most popular literary genre of late medieval and early-

- modern Iceland, with over a thousand individual sets preserved from the late fourteenth-century onwards, the majority of them based on prose sources, in particular the romances; see Hughes 2005.
- 8 This would agree with estimates for Europe in general, cf. Jakobi-Mirwald 2004, 162.
 - 9 *Sagna Flockur Wtlendskra Þjóða Forkunar fröðlegur Af Jmislegum Annara Landa þjóðum framande Keisurum, Kongum, greifum, Hertogum, Jórlum, Riddurum, Junkiærum, herum, hófðingium, hetium, kóppum, merkelegum maktar & mikelshättar múnnum, er áður ä fyrre öldum adskilianlegar hälfur heimsens byggdt hafa. Innehalldande þeirra Ättslöder & uppruna, blömlegan bradþroska, Vijsdöm & riddaralegar íþrötter, i Vitreidum, böknäme, Einviþgum, äræde & ätektum ijmsra konga rijkja, er þeir med ofsa & orrustum under sig laugdu. Kostgæfelega Saman Hendtur, yfirsenn & endurbættur af Ehrurijkum & ættgófugum hófðings manne Magnuse Joonssyni ad Wigur, þeim til fröðleiks & skiemmtunar, er þesshättar fornar frásaugur heira vilia. Enn af hans forlage skrifadur af Joone Þördarsyni Anno MDCXCVI (London, British Library, Add. 4859).*
 - 10 Manuscript production in the 18th and 19th centuries has thus far not been the subject of systematic investigation; see however, Grímur M. Helgason 1973, 1979 and 1988; McKinnell 1978-79, Driscoll 1997 and, most recently, Davíð Ólafsson 2008 and 2010.
 - 11 Cf. the articles by Davíð Ólafsson and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon in the present volume.
 - 12 *Ein Skjemtileg Sögu Bók Innihalldandi nockrar Sögur til dægna stittjngar á kvöldum j heima húsum og fröðleiks þeim sem eptir taka vilja Samann sett og Skrifud af Finni GyslaSini 1872.*
 - 13 *öslökkvandi þrá eftir bókum.*
 - 14 *allt er mjög óvandað frá hendi hans.* Tereza Lansing is currently conducting an investigation of Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson's manuscripts as part of the "Reading and writing from below" project.
 - 15 *Regystur, Jfir Rímna Flokka, Forn Sögur, Ýmisleg Kvæði, Sálma og Bæner, med fleiru, Hvad upphripad hefur Jóhannes JónsSon, Bóndi á Smirlahóli í Haukadal. upphaflega birjad hér umm bil árid 18.18 til ársins 18.55.-56.*
 - 16 *Sögu-Bók Forn-manna, Sem Fráskírir þeirra Ättum og Atgjörfi, Hreisti og Hugþríði, Lunderni og Limasköpun, Vopnfimi og Viturleik<, > Manndád og Mörgu Fleiru, Ad níu Skrifud og Samansöfnud í eitt af Bóndanum Jóhannesi Jónssyni á Smirla-hóli á Árunum 1851-52-53-54-55-56-7".*
 - 17 *Tuttugu og sex FORN SÖGUR af Keisurum, Konúngum, Hertugum, Greifum, barónum bændum, þjónum og þrælum, vænum og vondum. Samansafnaðar og ritaðar af Jóhannesi Jónssyni.*
 - 18 Magnús and his manuscripts are discussed in greater detail in Driscoll 2012.
 - 19 This figure does not include several short biographies of ancient Greek poets and philosophers translated or adapted from Latin sources by Jón Espólin (1769-1836), which Magnús uses as fillers in three of the manuscripts.
 - 20 This is clear both from Magnús's own statements in the prefaces to many of the volumes, discussed further below, and from statements made about Magnús by others, including Magnús's grandson, Magnús Árnason, who said his grandfather's manuscripts had numbered around 100 (Einar Gunnar Pétursson, personal communication).
 - 21 *Síðan á úngdóms árum mínum hefi ek haft löngun til at lesa sögr, ok þegar ek var kominn til fullorðins ára, fór ek at safna saman sögum, fyrst Íslendinga sögum, ok eigi ateins þeim heldr öllum riddarasögum sem ek gat náð til ok fengið, ok síðan fór ek at skrifa þær upp [...]. Þegar ek var smali á Stað á Reykjanesi um fermíngar aldr var þar vinnu maðr er Teitr hét bróðir Ólafs Teitssonar bónda í Sviðnum á Breiðafirði, hann var fröðleiksmaðr hann átti skræðu af Huldar sögu, ásamt fleyri sögum; ek var opt at*

- reina at lesa þessa skræðu en geck þat illa því hún var rotin ok máð, & slæm skriptin. Þá hafði ek litla hugmynd um gildi gamalla bóka (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1501 4to).
- 22 The fact that sagas and *rímur* were read and copied at the fishing stations or *verstöðvar* has been noted, but never explored in any depth. There is a brief treatment of literary activity in the *verstöðvar* in the Lúðvík Kristjánsson 1980-86, IV, esp. pp. 238-55.
- 23 Þessa sögu skrifaði ek úngr á Stað á Reykjanesi eptir söguskræðu sem Kristján Einarsson á Grónesi útvegaði mér, en fóstrfaðir hans Ólafr Guðmundsson á Grónesi mun hafa átt hana. Síðan glataði ek sögu þeirri sem ek skrifaði, ok gat hvergi fengit hana aptr hvar sem ek rýndi eptir, mér var sagt hún væri til í þessum ok hinum stað, en þegar ek lagði drög til at fá hana þá var hún ecki til eða glötuð, sama var um Grónes skræðuna þegar ek reyndi at fá hana aptr, þá var hún hvergi til, ok víst undir lok liðin fyrir löngu. Loks gat Guðbrandr á Hvítadal fengit hana átján hundrut áttatýgi ok nýu hjá Sigurði Arnasyni í Kirkjuhvammi eða fyrir Sigurðar milligöngu norðan úr Fljótum at hann sagði, og svo feck ek hana hjá Guðbrandi (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 4940 4to).
- 24 ber þeim saman at mestu, en þat sem milli ber mun sú prentaða réttari (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1491 4to).
- 25 mér þykir æðimikill orðamunur þessarar & þeirrar prentuðu en lítill efnismunur ok þó nokkr, en mér finnst þessi skrifaða orðfyllri, ok frásögnin skipulegri þó at þat muni ecki miklu (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1498 4to).
- 26 sem eg hefi skrifað eptir skræðum, en hún er mikið frábrugðin að orðfæri, en ekki að efni (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1507 4to).
- 27 Þat er nokkut einkennilegt með þessa sögu hún hefir verit víða til hér á vestrlandi, og ek hefi skrifað hana mörgum sinnum fyrir ýmsa, því at efni hennar hefir þótt merkilegt, og sagan er falleg. En svo kom sú sem prentuð var fyrir nokkrum árum, sem er svo forn og ólík hinni at orðfæri at þær eiga ecki saman nema nafnið, en þó er efnid beggja at mestu leiti hið sama. Þessi sem hér er skrifuð er skrifuð orðrétt eptir þeirri prentuðu en hina á eg líka til á annari bók. Saga þessi er merkileg ok gömul, ok þykir ein sú bezta af riddarasögum (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1494 4to).
- 28 frábærlega bág at orðfæri en ek hefi reynt at laga þat nokkut (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1503 4to)
- 29 orðfæri sögunnar var ecki gott, ok hefi ek reynt at laga þat sem mér þótti óviðfeldnast, en hvergi brjálað efninu (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1501 4to).
- 30 [H]ann hefir alla sína æfi safnað og leitað eptir gömlum handritum og afskrifað alt, sem honum hefir þótt eitthvað merkilegt eða þess vert að ekki týndist; hann á nú í afskriftum 18 bækur í 4o, hverja bók upp á 800 síður, og eru á þeim margar fágætar sögur, sem honum hefir lánast að ná í víðsvegar af landinu og síðan afskrifað; hann mun vera einn af sögufróðustu mönnum, er nú lifa á landi hér (Sigfús Eymundsson, ed. 1897, 42).
- 31 Þat er svo undarlegt at þessar gömlu bækur hverfa, svo at einginn veit hvat af þeim verðr (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs 1503 4to).